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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program for beginning teachers in rural areas offered by Eastern Illinois University. The primary goal of the program is to assist beginning teachers in becoming independent decision makers in the classroom by providing survival skills and initial support and gradually introducing means for continuing professional growth. An advisory committee of representatives from the university faculty, local school districts, and area educational service units was established to guide the development of the program and to recommend future actions. The services provided for beginning teachers include a monthly seminar series offered at three regional sites and individualized, nonevaluative classroom visits by the coordinator of the program. The seminars focused on the following topics in sequence: (1) appropriate techniques for conducting parent conferences; (2) effective teaching practices; (3) self-evaluations of the teachers' behaviors; (4) techniques for classroom behavior management; (5) stress management; (6) individualized instruction in the classroom; and (7) professional growth. Individualized classroom visits were available to observe whatever the teacher requested and to offer feedback on questions or concerns the teacher might have. Problems with the program included excessive travel time required for the coordinator and the reluctance of beginning teachers to participate in the program after a stressful day in the classroom. Other options for assisting beginning teachers are mentor teacher programs and computerized networks. (KS)

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Teacher Induction in Rural Areas: A Challenge for All

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Teacher Induction in Rural Areas: A Challenge for All

> My students just don't want to learn. I've tried everything I know to motivate them, but nothing ever seems to work. I want so much to be able to help them, but I just don't know what to do next. Please help me!
>
> First year teacher
> October, 1990

This impassioned plea for assistance was received from an idealistic, naive, frightened, yet competent, beginning teacher who was asked to list some behavioral problems for future discussion in a seminar series. Sadly, her plight and fears are shared by many teachers who have just entered the profession. When a new teacher enters the classroom for the first time, just as much (and sometimes more) is expected of him/her as is expected of a 20-year veteran. Hoping to shape the lives of his/her students, explore in depth topics that are dear to his/her heart, and wanting cooperation, the new teacher is rudely introduced to the many frustrations of lonliness, petty politics, uncooperative and unmotivated students, and poor academic preparation on the part of the students. This "reality shock" is felt by some (Stone, 1987; Veenman, 1984) to be the major factor in the typical 15% attrition rate of first year teachers.

In an early work, Eye and Lane (1956) proposed means of assisting beginning teachers in the difficult transition from the sheltered college atmosphere to the front lines of the individual classroom. In postulating an induction process, they stated:

> The induction of a new teacher begins with the first official contact that the new teacher has with the school... The process ends when he is able to stand as any experienced member of the staff, with a feeling of security which will enable him to teach effectively without undue fear or apprehension... The process of induction cannot be measured in terms of days or months as some teachers will take longer than others in making the full adaptation as a member of the school staff. Practically speaking, the school should have some organized means of helping all new teachers for an

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> extended time, which means until they can profit sufficiently from a supervisory program designed for the entire staff (p. 325).

Johnston (1985) has proposed that a teacher induction program should include the following components: (1) provisions for acquiring additional knowledge and instructional skills; (2) opportunities for developing attitudes that foster effective teaching performance; (3) assistance in recognizing the effects of isolation; and (4) aid in becoming integrated into the school district and the community. While little argument with these goals has been voiced, the means by which programs of support for beginning teachers are delivered has varied greatly. The use of mentor teachers has proven to be popular (Shulman & Bernhardt, 1990), special university classes have been held (Zaharias and Frew, 1987), and Harvard University has instituted a computer network for beginning teachers to exchange ideas and commiserate (see Murphy, Merseth, & Morey, 1990 for a description).

When one attempts to conceptualize the development of a comprehensive program of support for beginning teachers however, many problems begin to surface. These problems are multiplied when one attempts to institute a program in rural areas. For example, many rural districts hire only one or a few new teachers each year. A program for one teacher is simply impractical. When districts cooperate and try a regional approach, then travel time becomes a factor. Differences in orientation across districts may have an effect as might relatively limited budgets. The Beginning Teacher Program at Eastern Illinois University has attempted to coordinate a program of support in a largely rural area of east central Illinois. The program description may be able to serve as a model for the development of similar efforts.

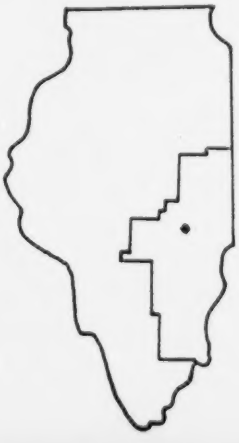
History

Founded originally as a normal school, Eastern Illinois University has grown into a comprehensive university of approximately 10,000 students. Located in Charleston, EIU is surrounded by a large number of very small school districts that service totally rural areas. In 1985, a proposal for a new program designed to provide support to EIU graduates of teacher certification programs was submitted and funded internally for implementation in the 1986-87 school year. The support model took three forms: (1) a newsletter was published and distributed periodically, (2) each semester a day-long seminar was held, and (3) consultant assistance from the university was made available to all EIU graduates if requested by that teacher's principal. The program received a very favorable response and ran successfully for 2 years. In the third year, the program took a hiatus while data were collected and the program was re-conceptualized. In 1989, the current program was begun.

Current Program

The current program for Beginning Teachers at EIU is based on the premise that continued professional growth is the most essential element in fostering good teaching. As a takeoff on the traditional three R's, Eastern's program offers new teachers the three S's, Survival, Support, and Sustained Growth. The idea was to provide new teachers with the immediate survival skills necessary to complete the first several months of school successfully, foster the development of a support network, and, as the first year progresses, gradually introduce means of continuing professional growth. The hope was that by the end of the year, the new teacher would have developed enough confidence to take his/her place as a contributing member of the school staff with a tentative plan for his/her professional future.

In establishing this program, the first step was to define the goals and identify the clientele to be served. EIU decided to focus on a reasonable geographic region and to service all of the new teachers in this region, not just the EIU graduates. Several factors entered into this decision. First, literature had consistently emphasized that most new teachers experienced the same stresses and problems (e.g., Heck & Williams, 1984). While some teachers adjusted better than others, all had similar concerns. In deciding to attempt to reach all of the new teachers in the area, EIU departed from its previously stated goal of providing "help" to those teachers who were referred by their principals. The assumption that sparked this departure was the feeling that most new teachers, however competent, would appreciate some nonevaluative assistance, and that the "referral" process used earlier carried with it a negative connotation of incompetence. By opening the program to all, this negative connotation could be erased. Second, since Illinois is a relatively large state with a number of universities scattered throughout, taking a cooperative, regional approach seemed to be the most efficient means of reaching new teachers. EIU graduates who took positions outside the region are referred to area universities who offer programs. Third, the travel time for the coordinator was considered. A travel limit of approximately 2 hours (one-way) was felt to be the maximum that should be planned. Below is a state map outlining the current geographic region. The region includes 84 school districts and 18 counties.



As decisions regarding the geographic area and clientele were being made, decisions concerning the goals of the program were also reached. The primary goal was determined to be to provide a means of assisting beginning teachers to become independent decision-makers in the classroom. With this goal in mind, the current sequence of providing survival techniques and initial support and moving gradually to more reflective methods was planned. It was felt that teachers needed first to experience some success with specific techniques and to become acquainted both with the coordinator of the program and the other new teachers being served before any real comfort, and subsequent lasting growth, could occur. It was determined to begin by providing very prescriptive recommendations and totally positive observations to allow the teachers to build confidence in the program. As the year progressed, more lasting steps could be taken.

A second major step in the program development was the constitution of an Advisory Committee. Invitations were extended to university faculty, local school districts, and area educational service units to provide representatives to serve on this committee. At regular meetings, the Committee was then asked to provide both input on the current offerings and suggestions for future directions. This Committee has always had animated meetings, and the recommendations have resulted in several positive changes. These meetings serve the additional purposes of maintaining university-community relations and allowing the participants to exchange ideas on topics outside of the Beginning Teacher Program. The insights and perceptions of educators with diverse roles has been very beneficial.

The final step in the development of the program was then to establish exactly what would be offered. Based on literature reviews, suggestions from the Advisory Committee, input from practicing teachers, and ideas from university faculty, it was determined to offer two separate, but related, services (1) a monthly seminar series offered at three regional sites, and (2) individualized, nonevaluative classroom visits by the coordinator of the program. Both of these services were offered free of charge to all beginning teachers in the area, and announcements of the offerings were distributed through the superintendents of every district. (N = 84).

The seminar series was geared to reflect the goal of providing teachers with specific skills first and moving throughout the year to more reflective skills. Three regional meeting sites were chosen to minimize the travel time for beginning teachers, dates were set, and topics chosen. For those teachers who wished and who paid a $70.00 tuition fee, one semester of graduate credit was offered for completion of the seminar. The first seminar focussed on appropriate techniques for conducting parent conferences, an immediate concern for most beginning teachers. This meeting has generally been quite formal, with the teachers dutifully taking notes and asking a few

questions. Initially, very little spontaneous participation took place. At the second meeting, effective teaching practices was the focus and teachers were asked to complete and score a short survey on their own behaviors. During the following month, they were asked to find one area in which they hoped to improve, write one goal for themselves, and evaluate their progress. At the third meeting when these progress reports were shared, a major shift in participation and support for each other was noted. Teachers began to talk with each other spontaneously, raise questions regarding specific children, and offer ideas that they felt might be helpful. The typical groups of teachers from the same school all but disappeared. The third meeting also examined specific techniques for classroom behavior management. The fourth meeting also focussed on behavior management, but rather than examining specific techniques, a process of self-questioning and analysis was introduced and modeled. The fifth meeting dealt with stress management and seemed to function almost as a catharsis for some teachers. The sixth examined how teachers might more effectively individualize instruction in their own classrooms, the seventh dealt with means of promoting one's own professional growth, and the eighth meeting concluded with each teacher sharing his/her own professional growth plan.

Individualized classroom visits were offered to all beginning teachers on a nonevaluative basis. It was explained that the purpose of these visits was to observe whatever the teacher requested and to offer feedback on whatever questions or concerns the teacher might have. As might be expected, very few requests for visits were received during the first few months. As the teachers became more comfortable with the coordinator and the program, requests for visits increased from one per month to eight per month. The most common request was for the coordinator to watch one or several children in the class with whom the teacher was having difficulty. Sometimes the observations focussed on the entire class's responses to instructions or on how certain subjects were presented. During the visits, detailed data collected via a computerized observation instrument were sometimes collected to assist the teachers in evaluating the effectiveness of management techniques. Time was allocated for the teacher and coordinator to meet and discuss the visit. Generally, after the first visit, requests for follow-up visits came at an increasing rate.

As with any program, certain problems developed. One major concern with EIU's program is the travel time involved for the coordinator. The maximum number of visits that can be conducted in a day is three when travel time, observation time, and meeting time are all combined. With this logistical obstacle, it is not possible to visit the teachers as often as would be liked. A possible solution to this problem would be to train mentor teachers in each region who could provide the visits, yet without funding to pay for their time, this is not yet a feasible alternative. Instead, visits within regions are coordinated to minimize the number of trips the coordinator makes to certain

areas. A second concern is the fact that no teacher can be required to participate in the program. Some beginning teachers, overwhelmed with responsibilities and under a great deal of stress, choose to go home and relax rather than attend a support series. A means of dealing with this concern would be to attempt to have participation in the program become a part of each district's negotiated contract. Some districts in the area are attempting this, others are not yet prepared to do so.

Future Possibilities and Recommendations

Service provision for beginning teachers in rural areas is a concept whose time has come, and it is an exciting prospect with which to become involved. As the teacher shortage manifests itself even more dramatically in the coming years, many rural schools will be faced with a cadre of instructors who are relatively new to the profession. The possibility of assisting these new, idealistic teachers in becoming polished professionals is both thrilling and frightening. New ideas are going to have to be tried and various service models will need testing. There are several possibilities that could be implemented soon on a widespread basis that are particularly applicable to rural settings.

The first idea is the concept of a mentor teacher program. Shulman and Bernhardt (1990) have implemented a mentor teacher program both in a large city and in rural areas. By providing experienced teachers with training specific in providing assistance to beginners, these researchers have shown that a mentor can have a significant impact on the success of a beginning teacher. By expanding this concept to offering training and follow-up for mentor teachers via an interactive television network, mentors throughout an entire region (including perhaps several states) could receive systematic training, participate in regular debriefing and retraining sessions, and network with each other. The technology for implementing this concept is already in place, all that is needed is the commitment and the fiscal resources.

A second concept that has been suceessfully implemented at Harvard University is a computerized network for beginning teachers. Again, the present technology would allow a region to establish such a network relatively simply. A possible expansion of this idea would entail the addition of consultants in various areas to whom requests for assistance could be automatically sent. Electronic communication could minimize the time needed for direct classroom visits by allowing both parties to exchange quite a bit of information before any visit would be made.

As districts, universities, and other service providers ponder the possibilities of implementing a program for beginning teachers, several points should be considered thoroughly. First, efforts should be collaborative in nature. All educational

service providers have a vested interest in the success of new teachers, and this interest should be focal point of all efforts to establish a support network. One of the best successes of EIU's program has been its ability to pull together all parties (e.g., universities, districts, teachers' organizations, and educational service agencies) to develop a coordinated thrust, not a fragmented series of half-efforts. Coalitions take time to build, yet the benefits are immeasurable. By concentrating on a "systems change" as opposed to a "cosmetic change", results will be much more lasting. When the participants are vested with responsibility, then deep commitments are made. Second, thorough planning should take place before efforts are launched. By realizing that certain decisions are "pivot points", and that the directions set by these decisions will have ramifications far into the future, planners will take seriously their responsibilities and develop a model of service provision that clearly addresses their goals. Finally, by consistently seeking input from the consumers of the program (i.e., the beginning teachers), the program directors will be able to monitor the effects of their efforts and make the necessary revisions.

Beginning teachers both need and desire assistance. As with any neophyte, the beginning teacher feels confident at times and incapable at times. The goal of a program of assistance must be to take these novices and give them the help necessary so that they, in turn, will eventually be able to assist other beginners. If beginning teachers are empowered to take charge of their own professional lives, then they will develop into the professionals that are needed in today's classrooms. The task is not simple, but the alternatives are not tolerable.

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